

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02
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R 232101Z JUN 77
FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2493
INFO AMCONSUL BELIZE
AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY MEXICO

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PBOR, PN, BH, GT
SUBJECT: PANAMA CONTINUES SUPPORT FOR BELIZE

REF: PANAMA A-101

SUMMARY: GOP AVOIDS DEBATE WITH GUATEMALA WHILE BUILDING DOMESTIC SUPPORT FOR BELIZE. ORGANIZED CAMPAIGN OF OPEN MEETINGS AND MEDIA COVERAGE BY JOURNALISTS RETURNING FROM BELIZE HAS EVOKED MIXED PUBLIC REACTION. INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR BELIZE IS NEWSWORTHY HERE; BRITISH WELCOME CONSTRUCTIVE PANAMANIAN SUPPORT. COST/BENEFIT ANALYSIS OF TORRIJOS' DECISION TO SUPPORT BELIZE IS HIGHLY FAVORABLE THUS FAR. END SUMMARY.

1. THE GOP CONTINUES TO AVOID ACRIMONIOUS DEBATE WITH GUATEMALA. RESPONSE TO GUATEMALAN CHARGES ABOUT TORRIJOS' BUSINESS INTERESTS IN BELIZE AND THE ALLEGED PRESENCE OF PANAMANIAN TROOPS THERE HAS BEEN RESTRAINED. GOP IS ATTEMPTING TO HEIGHTEN PUBLIC AWARENESS ON BELIZE
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THROUGH A WELL-ORCHESTRATED CAMPAIGN EQUATING BELIZE'S STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE WITH PANAMA'S EFFORT TO RECOVER EFFECTIVE SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE CANAL ZONE. SEVERAL ROUND-TABLE DISCUSSIONS ON THE BELIZEAN SITUATION HAVE ATTRACTED ATTENTION IN ACADEMIC AND MEDIA CIRCLES; GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES HAVE RECEIVED BRIEFINGS ON BELIZE AT POLITICAL TRAINING SEMINARS. (SEE REPAIR FOR

DETAILED ACCOUNT.)

2. IN EARLY JUNE, PANAMANIAN JOURNALISTS VISITED BELIZE TO OBTAIN FIRSTHAND INFORMATION ON THE SITUATION THERE. GROUP WAS RECEIVED BY DEPUTY PREMIER ROGERS, WHO SCOFFED AT REPORTS OF TORRIJOS' INVESTMENTS IN BELIZE AND CRITICIZED THE U.S. AS "SLOW IN DECIDING TO SUPPORT BELIZE". JOURNALISTS' VISIT HAS BEEN FOLLOWED BY A SPATE OF MEDIA BACKGROUNDEERS ON BELIZE. PUBLIC REACTION TO CAMPAIGN IS MIXED: MAN IN THE STREET IS PREOCCUPIED WITH OTHER PROBLEMS, WHILE STUDENTS AND INTELLECTUALS ARE STIMULATED BY ISSUE'S "THIRD WORLDLINESS". BUSINESS COMMUNITY IS INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN PUBLIC SECTOR DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS.

3. LOCAL PRESS GAVE PROMINENT COVERAGE TO THE JOINT COMMUNIQUE ISSUED AT THE OAS GENERAL ASSEMBLY BY JAMAICA, TRINIDAD, BARBADOS, GRENADA, AND PANAMA IN SUPPORT OF BELIZEAN INDEPENDENCE, SINGLING OUT PANAMA AS THE ONLY SPANISH-SPEAKING COUNTRY TO SIGN. BRITISH EMBASSY HERE WELCOMES PANAMA'S SUPPORT AND IS ATTEMPTING TO DEVELOP A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FOREIGN MINISTRY ON THE ISSUE. BRITISH INTENT IS TO GUARD AGAINST PRECIPITOUS STATEMENTS BY TORRIJOS DURING THEIR DIFFICULT DISCUSSIONS WITH THE GUATEMALANS.

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4. COMMENT: EARLY REPORTS INDICATE THAT TORRIJOS' DECISION TO SUPPORT BELIZE HAS YIELDED POSITIVE RETURNS. IN ASSUMING A POSITION THAT THREATENED LATIN SOLIDARITY ON THE CANAL QUESTION, TORRIJOS LEFT HIMSELF OPEN TO CHARGES OF ACTING ON IMPULSE. PRESIDENT LAUGERUD'S STATEMENT THAT "BREAKING OF RELATIONS WITH PANAMA WILL NOT CHANGE GUATEMALA'S SUPPORT FOR THE PANAMANIAN ON THE CANAL ISSUE" SUGGESTS THAT TORRIJOS HAS BEEN ABLE TO REVALIDATE HIS CREDENTIALS WITH THE THIRD WORLD AND TO PROVIDE A THIRD WORLD EVENT FOR DOMESTIC CONSUMPTION AT MINIMAL COST.
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